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Military Men Disagree on the Benefits of the "Hike" in Peace Times

The Recent Hard Practice March of 4,000 American Troops in Texas, Which Put Many Soldiers on Their Backs, Has Started Afresh a Discussion of Long Standing.

General Nelson H. Henry, Colonel George R. Dyer and Other Officers Give Here Their Opinions of Such Manoeuvres Based on Experience and Observation.

IN a recent issue The Tribune printed an account of how 4,000 American troops set out on a 500-mile "hike" from Galveston to Houston, Tex., and return. The thermometer stood at from 97 to 106 degrees, the highest temperature ever known in that part of Texas so early in the year.

"Men fell along the route bleeding at the nose," the dispatch said, "and others fell in convulsions, but still the 'hike' was pressed on. The powdered limestone roads gave forth clouds of dust, which stifled the parched throats of the soldiers. They did not give up until they fell or were pulled from the ranks by the surgeons and hospital corps men.

"Nearly a thousand of the coast artillerymen had seen service in the Spanish-American and Philippine wars. They declared that their experiences in those campaigns were not to be compared with this 'hike.' The canteens were filled with water in the morning and were supposed to last till noon, but almost invariably they were empty when three hours out of camp. The railroad water tanks, which were depended on for a supply, were inadequate. The men broke ranks and wandered about the farms foraging for water.

"The sixty-pound packs which the men carried across their shoulders were abandoned, in many cases, and had to be picked up and loaded on wagons pressed into service for the purpose. The ambulances were filled to their capacity, and private conveyances were used also to carry the sick and footsore."

Such an account recalls the questions which have been raised in recent years concerning the desirability of the "hike," or hard practice march. Does it pay, after all, to send green troops, militia and artillerymen, who are little trained in footwork, on long and difficult marches, such as would be a hardship in time of war? Does it pay, even in the case of regular infantry? What is the object of the "hike," and what are the results which it accomplishes? Granted that there must be a certain amount of hard marching, how is it best accomplished? What can officers and men do to make their task more bearable?

SEVERE TEST FOR MILITIA.

Complaints of hard marching and hot weather have been heard after more than one season's national guard campaign. Many times New York regiments have had their ambulances filled with men who had been worn out by hours of marching in a burning sun. One of the severest tests to which New York troops have been put in recent years was during the manœuvres of 1904 near Manassas, Va., on the field where the two battles of Bull Run were fought during the Civil War.

On that occasion the Blue army, under General Bell, met the Brown army of General Grant in four days of uninterrupted "battle." The roads were dry from weeks of drouth and a blistering sun was overhead. Four New York regiments took part in the manœuvres.

The 12th had just arrived at 10 o'clock in the morning, after a night in the train, and was lined up for ammunition inspection, when three members collapsed from the heat. All the regiments suffered during the day, though it was spent almost entirely in camp. Cornelius Vanderbilt and H. H. Rogers, jr., were officers in the 12th, which saw the hardest service of the manœuvres.

The two armies were supposed to represent only the advance of two larger forces. As a result the manœuvres were rapid and exhausting. In the Brown army two battalions which were needed to reinforce a weak spot in the line were brought from camp at double time, a distance of nearly three miles. At midnight the 12th New York was ordered on an all night march to the extreme right wing of the Browns.

The regiment had had a hard day of marching and manœuvring in the sun and had only one night in which to recuperate from the long all-night ride in the train. The men kept their places stubbornly, and though many were taken from the ranks in sheer exhaustion the regiment reached its destination on the right wing of the Brown army in good condition in the morning.

THE HOTTEST DAY.

The third day was the hottest of the manœuvres. The Brown army took the aggressive, and the 12th was sent on a flanking march of fifteen miles. Alone this would have been a hard day's work for seasoned infantry. The dust hung over the line in a great white column, and the heat drove the men nearly to desperation. Again and again during the halts the tired guardsmen, foraging for water, would find a spring and drink it dry, so that late comers had to take the liquid mud at the bottom or go thirsty.

They showed their pluck under the terrible heat, however, and man after man was overcome and fell fainting in his place in the dusty line. The ambulances were filled with the stragglers. Strict orders had been given that each man's equipment of thirty-eight pounds must be brought intact to the end of the march. Not a few of the exhausted ones were kept in their places by comrades who took part of their load to their own shoulders. Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt, from the lawn of the house where she was a guest, saw her husband, white with dust and dripping with perspiration, toiling along with his regiment, the blanket roll of a footsore private hanging over his shoulder. Late in the afternoon the 12th reached its position, in good order but nearly worn out.

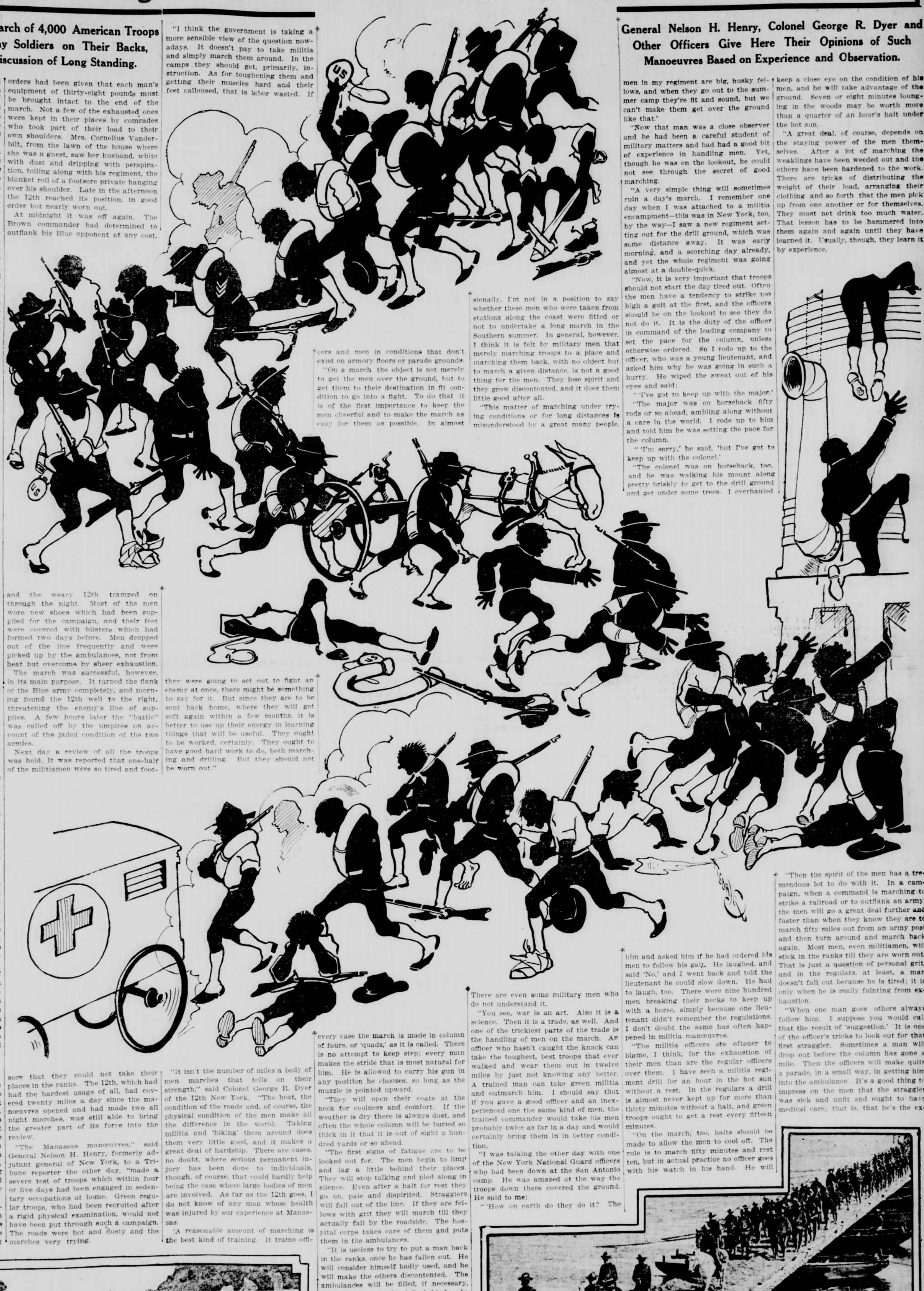
At midnight it was off again. The Brown commander had determined to outflank his Blue opponent at any cost, and the weary 12th tramped on through the night. Most of the men wore new shoes which had been supplied for the campaign, and their feet were covered with blisters which had formed two days before. Men dropped out of the line frequently and were picked up by the ambulances, not from heat but overcome by sheer exhaustion.

The march was successful, however, in its main purpose. It turned the flank of the Blue army completely, and morning found the 12th well to the right, threatening the enemy's line of supplies. A few hours later the "battle" was called off by the umpires on account of the jaded condition of the two armies.

Next day a review of all the troops was held. It was reported that one-half of the militiamen were so tired and footsore that they could not take their places in the ranks. The 12th, which had had the hardest usage of all, had covered twenty miles a day since the manœuvres opened and had made two all night marches, was still able to bring the greater part of its force into the review.

"The Manassas manœuvres," said General Nelson H. Henry, formerly adjutant general of New York, to a Tribune reporter the other day, "made a severe test of troops which within four or five days had been engaged in sedentary occupations at home. Green regular troops, who had been recruited after a rigid physical examination, would not have been put through such a campaign. The roads were hot and dusty and the marches very trying.

"I think the government is taking a more sensible view of the question nowadays. It doesn't pay to take militia and simply march them around. In the camps they should get, primarily, instruction. As for toughening them and getting their muscles hard and their feet calloused, that is labor wasted. If they were going to set out to fight an enemy at once, there might be something to say for it. But since they are to be sent back home, where they will get soft again within a few months, it is better to use up their energy in learning things that will be useful. They ought to be worked, certainly. They ought to have good hard work to do, both marching and drilling. But they should not be worn out."



"It isn't the number of miles a body of men marches that tells on their strength," said Colonel George R. Dyer of the 12th New York. "The heat, the condition of the roads and, of course, the physical condition of the men make all the difference in the world. Taking militia and 'hiking' them around does them very little good, and it makes a great deal of hardship. There are cases, no doubt, where serious permanent injury has been done to individuals, though, of course, that could hardly help being the case where large bodies of men are involved. As far as the 12th goes, I do not know of any man whose health was injured by our experience at Manassas.

"A reasonable amount of marching is the best kind of training. It trains officers and men in conditions that don't exist on armory floors or parade grounds.

"On a march the object is not merely to get the men over the ground, but to get them to their destination in fit condition to go into a fight. To do that it is of the first importance to keep the men cheerful and to make the march as easy for them as possible. In almost every case the march is made in column of fours, or 'quads,' as it is called. There is no attempt to keep step; every man makes the stride that is most natural for him. He is allowed to carry his gun in any position he chooses, so long as the muzzle is pointed upward.

"They will open their coats at the neck for coolness and comfort. If the weather is dry there is always dust, and often the whole column will be buried so thick in it that it is out of sight a hundred yards or so ahead.

"The first signs of fatigue are to be looked out for. The men begin to limp and lag a little behind their places. They will stop talking and plod along in silence. Even after a halt for rest they go on, pale and dispirited. Stragglers will fall out of the line. If they are fellows with grit they will march till they actually fall by the roadside. The hospital corps takes care of them and puts them in the ambulances.

"It is useless to try to put a man back in the ranks, once he has fallen out. He will consider himself badly used, and he will make the others discontented. The ambulances will be filled, if necessary, but no men can be left behind. In theory, a marching regiment in manœuvres is in the enemy's country, and it cannot abandon its men."

Officers in the regular army are not given to talking on matters of army policy. However, an infantry officer who has had long experience in the service consented to speak on interesting points regarding the "hike," or practice march, and to tell of some conditions, little known to laymen, which affect the progress and morale of a marching column.

"This 'hike' to Houston," he said, "is hardly within my province. I understand that a large proportion at least of the force which had such a hard day of it consisted of coast artillery. Professionally, I'm not in a position to say whether these men who were taken from stations along the coast were fitted or not to undertake a long march in the Southern summer. In general, however, I think it is felt by military men that merely marching troops to a place and marching them back, with no object but to march a given distance, is not a good thing for the men. They lose spirit and they grow discontented, and it does them little good after all.

"This matter of marching under trying conditions or for long distances is misunderstood by a great many people. There are even some military men who do not understand it.

"You see, war is an art. Also it is a science. Then it is a trade, as well. And one of the trickiest parts of the trade is the handling of men on the march. An officer who hasn't caught the knack can take the toughest, best troops that ever walked and wear them out in twelve miles by just not knowing any better. A trained man can take green militia and outmarch him. I should say that if you gave a good officer and an inexperienced one the same kind of men, the trained commander would take his men probably twice as far in a day and would certainly bring them in in better condition.

"I was talking the other day with one of the New York National Guard officers who had been down at the San Antonio camp. He was amazed at the way the troops down there covered the ground. He said to me:

"'How on earth do they do it? The men in my regiment are big, husky fellows, and when they go out to the summer camp they're fit and sound, but we can't make them get over the ground like that.'

"Now that man was a close observer and he had been a careful student of military matters and had had a good bit of experience in handling men. Yet, though he was on the lookout, he could not see through the secret of good marching.

"A very simple thing will sometimes ruin a day's march. I remember one day when I was attached to a militia encampment—this was in New York, too, by the way—I saw a new regiment setting out for the drill ground, which was some distance away. It was early morning, and a scorching day already, and yet the whole regiment was going almost at a double-quick.

"Now, it is very important that troops should not start the day tired out. Often the men have a tendency to strike too high a gait at the first, and the officers should be on the lookout to see they do not do it. It is the duty of the officer in command of the leading company to set the pace for the column, unless otherwise ordered. So I rode up to the officer, who was a young lieutenant, and asked him why he was going in such a hurry. He wiped the sweat out of his eyes and said:

"'I've got to keep up with the major.'

"The major was on horseback fifty rods or so ahead, ambling along without a care in the world. I rode up to him and told him he was setting the pace for the column.

"'I'm sorry,' he said, 'but I've got to keep up with the colonel.'

"The colonel was on horseback, too, and he was walking his mount along pretty briskly to get to the drill ground and get under some trees. I overhauled him and asked him if he had ordered his men to follow his gait. He laughed, and said 'No,' and I went back and told the lieutenant he could slow down. He had to laugh, too. There were nine hundred men breaking their necks to keep up with a horse, simply because one lieutenant didn't remember the regulations. I don't doubt the same has often happened in militia manœuvres.

"The militia officers are oftener to blame, I think, for the exhaustion of their men than are the regular officers over them. I have seen a militia regiment drill for an hour in the hot sun without a rest. In the regulars a drill is almost never kept up for more than thirty minutes without a halt, and green troops ought to get a rest every fifteen minutes.

"On the march, too, halts should be made to allow the men to cool off. The rule is to march fifty minutes and rest ten, but in actual practice no officer goes with his watch in his hand. He will keep a close eye on the condition of his men, and he will take advantage of the ground. Seven or eight minutes lounging in the woods may be worth more than a quarter of an hour's halt under the hot sun.

"A great deal, of course, depends on the staying power of the men themselves. After a lot of marching the weaklings have been weeded out and the others have been hardened to the work. There are tricks of distributing the weight of their load, arranging their clothing and so forth that the men pick up from one another or for themselves. They must not drink too much water. That lesson has to be hammered into them again and again until they have learned it. Usually, though, they learn it by experience.

"Then the spirit of the men has a tremendous lot to do with it. In a campaign, when a command is marching to strike a railroad or to outflank an army, the men will go a great deal further and faster than when they know they are to march fifty miles out from an army post and then turn around and march back again. Most men, even militiamen, will stick in the ranks till they are worn out. That is just a question of personal grit, and in the regulars, at least, a man doesn't fall out because he is tired; it is only when he is really fainting from exhaustion.

"When one man goes others always follow him. I suppose you would call that the result of 'suggestion.' It is one of the officer's tricks to look out for that first straggler. Sometimes a man will drop out before the column has gone a mile. Then the officers will make quite a parade, in a small way, in getting him into the ambulance. It's a good thing to impress on the men that the straggler was sick and unfit and ought to have medical care; that is, that he's the exception and not the rule. But when the whole command is hot and tired and men are falling out frequently the less that is said about straggling the better.

"Sometimes an epidemic of straggling can be stopped by halting the command when two or three men are wavering and about ready to give up. If a man has pluck and sticks along with his mouth

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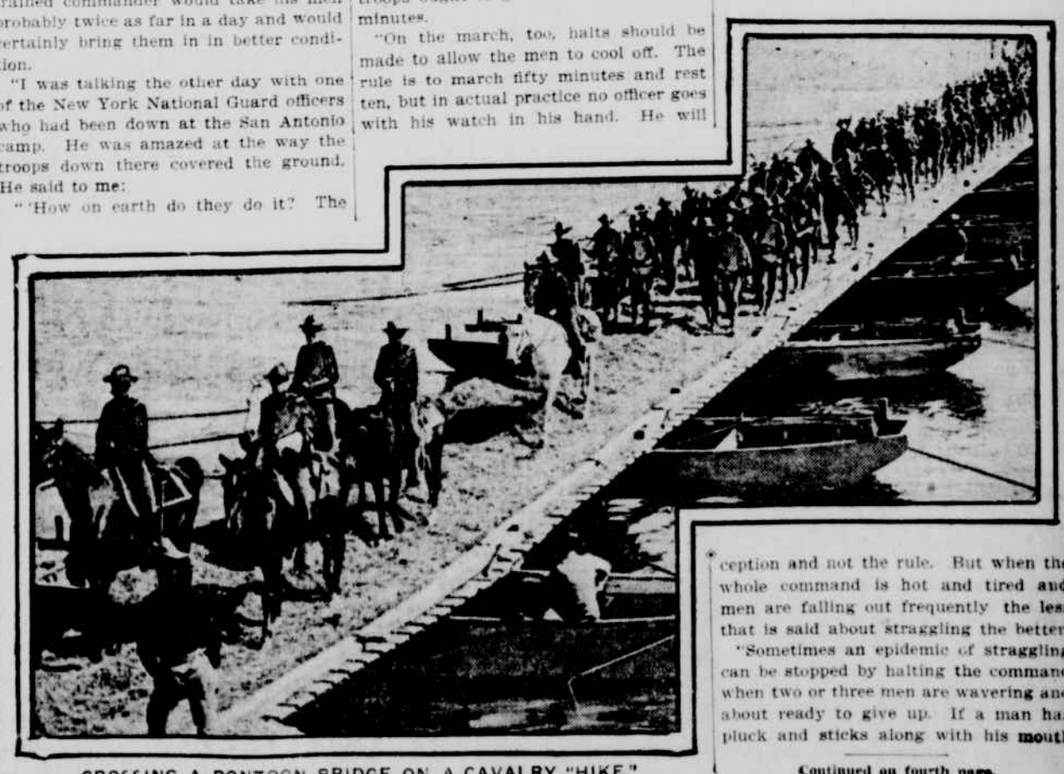
PHOTOGRAPH TAKEN DURING A REST PERIOD IN THE EARLY STAGES OF A "HIKE."



CROSSING A PONTOON BRIDGE ON A CAVALRY "HIKE."